

### Environment Rating Scales and Early Achievers

The Environmental Rating Scales (ERS) are one set of assessment tools used in Early Achievers. The ERS assess the learning environment, health and safety of children in multiple early learning settings. The ERS is the most valid and reliable tool available to measure the quality of environments in an objective way.

Through both the QRIS pilot (2007-2009) and in Early Achievers since 2012, Washington has seen that using the ERS, coupled with coaching, leads to large improvements in child care quality.

The ERS scales are designed to assess *process quality* in an early childhood or school age care group, which consists of the various interactions that go on in a classroom between staff and children, staff, parents, and other adults, among the children themselves, and the interactions children have with the many materials and activities in the environment including space, schedule and materials that support these interactions. Process quality is assessed primarily through observation and has been found to be more predictive of child outcomes than structural indicators such as staff to child ratio, group size, cost of care, and even type of care, for example child care center or family child care home.

*Nationally, the ERS Scales are used in 27 out of 36 state QRIS systems. It is available in more than 20 languages and used officially in more than 30 countries (and on every continent except Antarctica) including China, Japan, Brazil, Chile, Hong Kong, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Taiwan, Bahrain*

3 Different Environmental Rating Scale (ERS) Tools		Languages
<b>(ECERS-R) The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised:</b> Designed to assess programs for preschool-kindergarten aged children, from 2½ through 5 years of age.		Data collection is conducted in
<b>(ITERS-R) The Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale-Revised:</b> Designed to assess programs for children from birth to 2 ½ years of age.		English, Spanish, Somali, Korean or Cantonese
<b>(FCCERS-R) The Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale-Revised:</b> Designed to assess family child care programs - conducted in a provider's home.		

In order to provide high quality early care and education that allows children to reach their full potential a quality program must provide for the three basic needs all children have: 1) protection of their health and safety, 2) building positive relationships, and 3) opportunities for stimulation and learning from experience. No one component is more or less important than the others, nor can one substitute for another - it takes all three to create quality care. Each of the three basic components of quality care manifests itself in the program's environment, curriculum, schedule, supervision and interaction, and can be observed. These are the key aspects of process quality that are included in the environmental rating scales.

### Using the ERS to Improve Quality: A Case Study

When the Technical Assistance Specialist from Child Care Resources first visited a child care facility that recently enrolled in Early Achievers, there was no structure to the classroom. Materials were strewn around the facility with no intentionality to how children would use them - puzzles were mixed up with the blocks, there was no area for art, and books were scattered about. The daily schedule lacked a natural flow and just when the children were getting engaged in one activity the teachers would transition them onto the next one, causing a lot of starting and stopping that didn't allow the kids to fully engage.

The Technical Assistance Specialist used the ERS to gather baseline data about the classroom to help the staff develop a plan for improvement. Using this data, she organized a teacher training to discuss creating an "intentional classroom". During this training teachers learned how they could thoughtfully layout the classroom to facilitate children's learning, and by doing help children engage more thoughtfully in play. The teachers also reconfigured their daily schedules and use of materials to facilitate children's learning - the

big lesson for the teachers was that *free play doesn't equal free for all*. Rather, with a thoughtful set up and appropriate levels of teacher facilitation, free play can be a very organized way for children to learn and explore.

*Free play doesn't  
equal free-for-all*

The center director invested in learning materials and supported ongoing improvements. Teachers began to restructure their classrooms using the ERS data and their Technical Assistance Specialist for support. Some changes the teachers made include:

- Teachers had previously kept a fish tank on a high shelf, out of the reach and vision of the children so that the children wouldn't disturb the fish. Through the ERS they learned that having opportunities to observe the fish tank was a great "science" activity – the tank was moved into the classroom so the children can learn about feeding the fish, observing its behavior, and inspire art projects and discussions.
- The teachers are more thoughtful about what books they choose to display and rotate from their book collection. Now when the book mobile comes, they select books that match with what the children are learning about in their classrooms.
- Instead of creating one contained "science area" teachers have incorporated science throughout the room - wood discs/blocks cut from a tree log were added, dried flowers were added in the dramatic play area, and natural collections of outdoor objects were brought into the classroom.
- In the Dramatic play area, a second "theme" was added ("Optometrist's Office") to the existing "Housekeeping" area, giving children additional opportunities to engage in the deeper play that has been shown to support development.

Teachers report that the ERS has prompted conversations about how they use their space to foster learning. The result has been "happier" and "productive" classrooms that have fewer disruptions and lower stress levels. The program will participate in the Early Achievers rating process this spring.

### What ERS Looks For

ERS is a multi-facilitated tool that looks at numerous indicators of quality. Below are some examples of how the ERS assesses the quality of early learning environments.

Item	Sample Goal	What it looks like	What it doesn't look like
<b>Meals/snacks</b>	Encourage a pleasant social atmosphere where children can learn healthful food habits and develop self-help skills	Teachers sit at the table with children and show enthusiasm for healthful foods; teachers facilitate conversations about topics of interest to the children; children are given the opportunity to help in preparation of meals or snacks	Teachers are too busy to sit with children during meals and conversations among children are discouraged
<b>Nature/Science</b>	Encourage nature/science vocabulary and understanding of basic natural concepts	Teachers take children outside on a regular basis to provide them with the opportunity to explore the natural world; teachers facilitate discussions about what the children are experiencing	Children do not have daily access to the natural world and there are few opportunities for discussions about nature/science concepts
<b>Fine Motor</b>	Provide children with an environment that will encourage the development of fine motor skills	Fine motor materials are stored on low, open shelves, organized for independent use, teachers facilitate child engagement with the fine motor materials	Fine motor materials are missing pieces or are not developmentally appropriate (e.g., too easy or too hard)

<b>Free Play</b>	Encourage children's approaches to learning such as curiosity and persistence in a task	Teacher provides children with ample and varied developmentally appropriate learning materials; teacher supervises to ensure children are engaged; interacts by creating conversations and asking questions to challenge their thinking	Teachers provide children with some learning materials and enough supervision to keep children safe
------------------	---	---	---

### Modifications to ERS in Early Achievers

Early Achievers promotes a culture of learning, assessing, and using data to inform decisions and promote ongoing improvements. Below are examples of how the ERS has been modified since Early Achievers was initially launched.

Classroom Averages	
<b>Problem:</b> Originally, each classroom in a program needed to meet the threshold requirement of 3.5 to receive a Level 3. One classroom could pull down the rating of the entire facility.	<b>Modification:</b> The rating is now calculated on the average of all classrooms.
Resources and Materials	
<b>Problem:</b> Many programs, particularly programs serving low income children, do not have adequate learning materials to score well on the ERS.	<b>Modification:</b> Needs Based Grants have been issued with specific ERS resource lists and coaching support to help programs purchase materials.
Reliability of Coaches	
<b>Problem:</b> Initially, there were not enough ERS reliable coaches to assist providers with interpreting ERS data and preparing programs for ratings.	<b>Modification:</b> Specialists and coaches have been trained and there is an "ERS anchor" in each of the 7 CCA regions that can train others to reliability. This has built local capacity and bolstered the confidence of coaches and TA specialists to assist providers.
Professional Development	
<b>Problem:</b> The initial six trainings in Level 2 to prepare programs for rating were useful, but professionals asked for a deeper level training to prepare for rating.	<b>Modification:</b> The Early Achievers Institutes offer deeper levels of ERS training to support participating programs. Participants receive ERS resources, including the newest version of the ERS and the "All About Books" which provide detailed information and resources. Addition follow-up training is being developed by CCA.
More Detailed Reporting for Programs	
<b>Problem:</b> The QRIS database, WELS, provides high level information on ERS scores, but programs were asking for more specific information on items where scores were not above a 3.0.	<b>Modification:</b> UW team members build customized ERS feedback reports on items that are scored a 3.0 or below. Coaches review this information with programs to give providers a detailed understanding of the rating support the development of quality improvement goals.
Specific ERS Questions	
<b>Problem:</b> There was a desire for a direct line for deeper questions on the ERS from CCA coaches and TA Specialists.	<b>Modification:</b> UW Inbox for Specific ERS Questions was created at <a href="mailto:erscqel@uw.edu">erscqel@uw.edu</a> . The UW is able to field questions directly with the ERS authors.
Implementation of a Pre-Assessment to guide Rating Readiness	
<b>Problem:</b> Providers did not have a baseline level of quality prior to ratings. While CCA provided technical assistance to prepare programs for ratings, without data technical assistance was often broad.	<b>Modification:</b> All programs now receive a practice rating on both the ERS and CLASS to help TA Specialists and coaches target rating readiness with data.